

## Summer Lunch at Our Library

By Janet Reynolds

Library District #2 of Linn County—La Cygne, KS

[lacygnelibrary@gmail.com](mailto:lacygnelibrary@gmail.com)

About five or six years ago, we had some special summer programming at noon at the library and we offered some simple lunch, because we knew kids would be missing their normal lunch time. What we didn't expect was the "hunger" the kids had. We heard about the Summer Food Service Program. The director attended a meeting and found the paperwork absurd to be a site and sponsor, so we decided it wasn't a fit for us.



I shared my dream with the new SNAP-Ed educator at the Extension Office. She caught the vision and ran with it. She attended a different meeting that winter and said "We can do this! We can be just a site." So we partnered with a group in Wichita that made shelf-stable meals and started out small, four days a week when we had programs. The paperwork was minimal. I had to turn in a count to Wichita every day, and fill out a few things, and we had to have storage for the meals.

We created a Summer Meals Action Team made up of local folks to help advise us. We also asked for church and civic groups to sponsor a week by helping serve lunch and donating fresh fruits and vegetables to supplement the shelf-stable meals. That was successful, but the meals were less than successful. The waste was huge and the food was not tasty or appealing, so the Action Team told me to look further before next summer.



So I started looking for someplace that would offer hot, appealing, tasty meals for kids. We contracted with the company that provided meals for the senior citizens in our area. The food came plated in compartment trays at 9:30 AM and we had to keep it hot and safe until lunch time. The food was better! The volunteers became mentors, read at the table and played games with the children. But the paperwork became a nightmare. We had all kinds of forms to fill out, state inspections, health inspections, and hours of paperwork. When our contractor didn't fill out the right forms and we didn't have a certain sign posted, we got written up, and if our advertisements weren't worded exactly as they wanted, we got written up. The action team was not totally pleased with the contractor and food provided so early, so they asked us to consider going self-prep. We knew this would be more work. We would have to meet all the state and federal guidelines, from not feeding adults to having six-inch bananas. We were fortunate to have a retired caterer/restaurant owner who had some food service experience to help us out, so we gave it a try. At the end of that summer, the team asked, "Do you think we could do this on our own, financially? And not have to depend on getting reimbursed by USDA?"

Wow what a scary idea! So I threw out a number of \$5000 and said if we had that by the end of March, we can do it! The community rallied around us and we had that money by the end of February. So then we started planning meals. We wanted to follow USDA guidelines, but also make the food fresh and appealing and have some choices. We also wanted to feed the mentors, because if kids see an adult eating with them, it helps. We were hugely successful! Our slowest days we served about 20 kids, and during the summer we served 190 different kids. Our meals cost us about \$2.50 a plate, with lots of choices, and best of all it was HOT and appealing.

We've had to make many changes, and the summer library program seems to revolve around the lunch schedule and room use, but I didn't want it to be an eat-and-run program. I wanted the kids to learn something. So over the years we've added programs to encourage library participation as well as lunch. In 2018 we did "Manners Matter Monday," encouraging the kids to be on their best behavior because mentors were watching for the best-behaved kids. Since we are very rural and most kids don't get very far from home, we brought in some sort of educational performer or entertainer for them to enjoy either before or after lunch. Tuesday was "Try it you might like it" with some new or different food for them to sample. Wednesday was Wellness with exercises or games to get the group moving. Thursday was Career Day, and people from the community came in and talked about their jobs. Friday was Free book Friday and Friday snack bags for the weekend, which provided food for the weekend. We also took hot food to Linn Valley Lakes, a neighboring community, on Fridays.

Summer lunch is great! You have to find the model that works for you. I don't want to discourage anyone from trying it. We tried several ways before we found one that the community liked and that worked well for us. Just realize that there is some work involved, no matter which method you choose. Being simply a site is the easiest; if your school district will sponsor you, it's even easier because they are used to all the paperwork. Take advantage of the saying that "have food, kids will come" and build your summer reading program around it. We have our story times and activities close to lunch, so kids come for one and stay for the other. Take advantage of possibilities and partnerships to make this beneficial for your library as well. Our Friends group helps, as do several retired teachers.

Good luck with your program and if you have any questions I'd be happy to share our program and model with you. Check out photos on our library Facebook page: [Linn County Library District #2](#). We are small – about 1200 in our town and 2400 in our taxing area – and rural, so our biggest problem is getting kids to the library to eat. We don't have transportation to bring them in and our school district is consolidated, so we don't serve enough meals to make that work well either, but I've seen it work in other communities. My advice is jump in slowly and try to involve some folks that will help you make decisions and who see the big picture, including the library's situation and involvement.